"THE CHURCH MOUSE" (Warner Brothers-British, 1935) Directed by Monty Banks; Screenplay by Scott Darling from the play by Ladiislaus Podor and Paul Frank; 75 minutes
With Laura La Plante, Ian Hunter, Edward Chapman, Jane Carr, Clifford Heatherley, John Batten, Monty Banks, Gibb McLaughlin, Florence Wood, George Mathis.

All American production companies distributing in Britain were required by law to produce a certain amount of British films every year. Most companies, especially in the early 30's, disposed of this obligation by making real chéapos, not caring whether they were ever shown or not. But Warners, under the British supervision of Irving Asher, took their responsibilities seriously and turned out some really good pictures that don't at all deserve their obscurity. (We have two more of them waiting for future series) "The Church Mouse", an old reliable chestnut of a play that did yeomen service later on as a safe and limited stage comeback vehicle for Mary Pickford and Colleen Moore, had already been filmed once in Hollywood a couple of years earlier as "Beauty and the Boss", with Warren William and Marian Marsh. This second version is quite different in its wholly British charm and milieu, while retaining a Hollywood pace and slickness.
Monty Banks (married to Grace Fields) had of course worked in Hollywood in the 20's as a comedian, and contributes a nice comic vignette to this film too. Much of it is quite risque in a thoroughly tasteful fashion, and has something of a lightheartedness to it - rare indeed in British comedy of the 30's, which tended to be either wholeheartedly and unabashedly vulgar, or totally pure and innocent, but seldom achieved this effective middle-ground sophistication.
Laura La Plante, whose silent peak we saw a few weeks back in the 1925 "Skinners Dress Suit", had a good voice, spoke well, and looked great - yet somehow never regained her great popularity in her all too few talkies, although she made occasional films until the mid-50's. She had just married production head Irving Asher when she made this film which undoubtedly accounts for the production care afforded it, but she certainly more than justifies such nepotism!

D.W. GRIFFITH - An interview, 1930 5 minutes
Made as an introduction to the sound reissue of "Birth of a Nation" this interview between D.W. and Walter Huston, his "Abraham Lincoln" star, is perhaps over-planned and under-rehearsed, and considering the momentous occasion, it's disappointingly superficial. But after all, it was designed as a publicity gimmick, not as an archival contribution to film history. Griffith's modesty isn't particularly convincing, but his sincerity as he talks about his parents' role in the Civil War is quite touching, and it's good to have that rich voice on record.

"THE GREATEST QUESTION" (First National, 1919; released, 1920) 55 mins
Directed by D.W. Griffith; story by William Hale; camera, G.W. Bitzer
With Lillian Gish, Robert Harron, Ralph Graves, Eugenie Beisserer, Gosta Ekman, Cora Withers, Tom Wilson, Josephine Crowell, George Pickett, Clarence Lull, James Bruce. PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT arranged and played by Stuart Oderman
The last of Griffith's brief interm group of rural romances - money-making retrenchments between his big spectacles - "The Greatest Question" is also, in a sense, Griffith's farewell to his Victorian heroines. Here Lillian Gish is traditionally naive and innocent, and despite surviving attempted rape and near murder, wins up unsullied and telling her boy friend that 'we don't know enough to get married'. Within the year, she was playing a mature and sensitive woman in "Way Down East". Griffith was to try to keep the films ma rigia and produce an illegitimate offspring! "The Greatest Question" is a curious hybrid of a film. Its spiritualist angle is frankly dragged in by the heels because it was a topic of great public interest then. As a film, it is one of the best illustrations of Griffith's stated desire to get away from his war films and epics and get back to "the sun on the corn and the wind". It not only breathes the outdoors, and makes a great deal of symbolic use of landscape, but it also reflects a great deal of the people and places of Griffith's childhood; the scene for example of the exact copy of the little church in Crestwood, Kentucky, where Griffith and his family are buried. Although the film lacks the pronounced Dickensian structure of "True Heart Susie", and its melodramatic finale is overdone - especially in view of the restraint and pastoral charm of the earlier portions of the film - it is such a visual joy (the print is a direct reduction from the original 35mm negative) that one can easily forgive it its weaknesses, it's not a major Griffith, but it's far from being a minor one. It deserves more comment than we can give it here, but we can cover more ground prior to the screening. -WKE-